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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of student-centered instruction at the higher education level and proposes use of the STUCEN scale to evaluate student centeredness as an institution-wide strategy and to link it to performance criteria such as student recruitment, retention, and graduation. The philosophy of student centeredness is discussed in terms of three aspects student orientation, integration of effort, and institutional objectives. The scale is comprised of 20 statements designed to measure the perception of the effectiveness of an academic institution along three dimensions of student centeredness: intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination, and responsiveness. The scale is intended to assist in distinguishing between student centeredness as a culture, as a strategy, and as a tactic. The STUCEN scale is appended. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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Student Centeredness: Conceptualizing and Operationalizing It

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Paper presented at the Mid-Atlantic Region Historically Black Colleges and Universities Faculty Showcase, *A Regional Conference on Successful Ideas and Practices*, held at The latham Hotel, Georgetown, Washington, DC, October 16, 1998.

Abstract

Realizing that no serious attempt has been made to conceptualize and operationalize student centeredness as an institution-wide strategy and link it to performance criteria such as student recruitment, retention, and graduation, this essay suggests the STUCEN scale for doing so. The scale is comprised of twenty statements designed to measure the perception of the effectiveness of an academic institution along the three dimensions of student centeredness: intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination, and responsiveness. This approach will allow one to make a distinction between student centeredness as a culture, as a strategy, and as a tactic.

Introduction

Student-centered instruction, that is, the requirement for a course/class to focus on the various learning styles of students in guiding teaching strategies, has been a major focus of researchers since the 1960s (e.g., Faust 1963, Sund 1974, Raines 1985, and Glasgow 1997). However, student centeredness, that is, the requirement for an academic institution to focus on the needs of students to guide its strategies, has received very little attention (Popejoy 1994, McCombs 1997). Presumably, the student centered academic institution will be more successful in terms of increasing student motivation and success. Yet, there has been conflicting evidence that this is indeed so (e.g., Kinkead & Harris 1993, Schrenko 1994). For something presumably as important as student centeredness, there has been neither a serious attempt to measure the construct nor any effort expended on significantly linking it to performance criteria such as student recruitment, retention,

and graduation. In short, does it really pay an academic institution to be student centered?

The student centered academic institution is one that successfully applies the student centeredness concept. *Student centeredness* can be defined in three ways: as a philosophy, as a concept, and as currently implemented. This approach will allow one to make the distinction between student centeredness as a culture, as a strategy, and as a tactic.

Student Centeredness as a Philosophy

Student centeredness as a philosophy entails three aspects. They are as follows.

1. *Student orientation.* This requires an understanding of the psychological and social factors that determine students' actions. Such an understanding enables the academic administrator to ask the questions that make it possible to identify core student needs, and this will in turn give direction to basic research. By identifying the basic student needs that they serve and defining their visions and missions accordingly, academic institutions will avoid myopia.

2. *Integration of effort.* This enables the academic institution to provide the value to meet student needs. It involves coordinating endeavors in terms of the elements of the required mix for each program or service. Moreover, because student centeredness is an institution-wide strategy, it is necessary that the whole academic institution be organized and coordinated to serve the student.

3. The setting of *institutional objectives.* An adoption of the student centeredness concept means seeking to serve student needs in order to meet the requirements for achieving

recruitment, retention and graduation objectives. This is essential for long-term survival.

In short, student centeredness must be formulated with a view to providing the academic institution with long-term direction. Many administrators, however, especially in Western academic institutions, must balance this against demands for short-term performance.

Conceptualizing Student Centeredness and Developing a Measure

The following operational definition of student centeredness as a construct links the preceding three core elements of the philosophy of the concept. *Student centeredness* is the institution-wide generation of program and service intelligence pertaining to current and future student needs, dissemination of the intelligence across departments, and institution-wide responsiveness to it.

Thus, student centeredness must be based not only on verbalized student opinions but must also be seen as a broader concept, because it includes consideration of such factors as competing academic institutions and legislative and political changes that affect student needs and performance. The current and future needs of students are considered. Consequently, what is offered in this paper is STUCEN, an instrument for measuring student centeredness. This is similar to Bernie Jaworski and Ajay Kohli's (1993) MARKOR, an instrument used to measure marketing orientation (for a synopsis, see Leyland Pitt 1997:14-19).

Student Centeredness as Implementation

Here one may ask: How many academic institutions have actually implemented the student centeredness concept. The answer is: Too few. Only a handful of academic institutions actually

stand out as practitioners of the student centeredness concept. Employing STUCEN, academic institutions will now be able to measure and assess their level of student centeredness.

The STUCEN Scale

STUCEN is a scale developed to allow administrators to assess the degree of student centeredness within their academic institutions. The scale appears in the Appendix.

All that is required to use the STUCEN scale is that administrators assess their academic institution on each of the twenty statements and indicate the extent of their agreement by circling the appropriate point on the scale. When they have completed all the items, they can utilize the scoring instructions that follow. There are no right or wrong answers, and the best approach is to work quickly and record first impressions.

How to Score STUCEN

1. If the questionnaire is completed by a single individual, simply use the ratings for each item on the scale; if it is completed by several people, obtain an average rating for each item.

2. Sum the (average) ratings for items 1 through 6 and divide by 6; sum the (average) ratings for items 7 through 11 and divide by 5; sum the (average) ratings for items 12 through 20 and divide by 9.

3. The three numbers derived reflect the perception of the effectiveness of the academic institution along the three dimensions of student centeredness: that is, *intelligence generation*

(how well the institution generates intelligence), *intelligence dissemination* (how well this intelligence is disseminated throughout the academic institution), and *responsiveness* (how well the institution responds to changes in the academic environment). The average of items 1 through 6 is the score for intelligence generation; the average for items 7 through 11 is the score for intelligence dissemination; the average for items 12 through 20 is the score for responsiveness.

What Do the Scores Mean

The lowest possible score to be derived on any of the STUCEN dimensions is 1, the highest is 7—it is unlikely that many academic institutions will be at these extremes. The nearer to 7 the score along the particular dimension is, the better the institution is perceived to be performing along that dimension, and vice versa. The dimension along which performance is least effective must receive immediate attention.

Conclusion

Student centeredness should not be viewed as a panacea for all academic institutional ills. People unfamiliar with student centeredness expect it to influence students to do things they would normally not do. The student-centered approach cannot persuade students to do things that they would not do under normal circumstances. Rather, the approach is a judicious way of finding out what students want.

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Appendix

The STUCEN Scale

Statement	Please circle one choice for each statement
1. In this academic institution, we meet with students at least once a year to find out what programs or services they will need in the future.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
2. In this academic institution, we do a lot of in-house student-needs research.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
3. We rapidly detect changes in our students' program and service preferences.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
4. We survey students at least once a semester to assess the quality of our programs and services.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
5. We are quick to detect fundamental shifts in the academic environment (e.g., competition, technology, funding requirements).	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
6. We periodically review the likely effect of changes in our academic environment (e.g., budgetary constraints) on students.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
7. We have interdepartmental meetings at least once a semester/term to discuss academic trends and developments.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
8. Personnel of the department responsible for student services in our academic institution spend time discussing students' future needs with other departments.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
9. When something important happens to a segment of our students, the whole academic institution knows about it in a short period.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly
10. Data on student satisfaction are disseminated at all levels in this academic institution on a regular basis.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I **disagree** strongly I **agree** strongly

11. When one department finds out something important about competing academic institutions, it is quick to alert other departments.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
12. It only takes us a very short time to decide how to respond to competing academic institutions' tuition or program changes.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
13. We hardly ever ignore changes in our students' program or service needs.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
14. We periodically review our program development efforts to ensure that they are in line with what students want.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
15. Several departments get together periodically to plan responses to changes taking place in our academic environment.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
16. If a major competing academic institution were to launch an intensive campaign targeted at our students, we would implement a response immediately.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
17. The activities of the different departments in this academic institution are well coordinated.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
18. Students' complaints never fall on deaf ears in this academic institution.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
19. If we came up with a great student recruitment, retention and graduation plan, we probably would be able to implement it.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly
20. When we find that students would like us to modify a program or service, the departments involved make concerted efforts to do so.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **I disagree** strongly **I agree** strongly